



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE SEWANEE REVIEW

VOL. XXV]

APRIL, 1917

[No. 2

THE WORK OF THOMAS HARDY

"One writing of heroes," the favorite author of a certain Mr. Nevil Beauchamp, tells us that the open secret is divulged to each age by its fit hero, and that the age of the prophet shall not hear it from the lips of the man of letters. Once in a while,—and this he does not tell us,—a hero of an earlier time comes forward again to sing in no disharmony with his latter-day brethren his version of the song. The song is all one, and its name is *The Meaning of Life*. To Thomas Hardy life means what it meant of old to the Northern singers. His expression of it is in images like to theirs; and could we trace the growth of their thought as we can of his, we might find the two alike in their beginning, and in their increase in vigor and scope. Hardy's thought is that of the age when the hero was a god; he is as Odin in the twentieth century, and he sings us the epic of our forefathers.

When we enter Bassetshire with Trollope we are in the midst of Victorian England. When with Hardy we enter Wessex, we are in a Saxon kingdom that has not been on the map since there have been maps,—even as an earldom it seems to have disappeared about the time of the Norman Conquest. Doubtless he adopts the name for no conscious motive but to signal his departure from fact, but to the reader it soon becomes symbolic of his outlook on life,—Saxon and not English; ninth century and not nineteenth. It is there he stands; and whatever there is of the new age in his books he shows us down the perspective of ten centuries, outlines merely through the mists of time. In the Saxon kingdom his feet are firmly planted. There with him we are forever in the presence of memorials of the older peoples,—their burial places, mounds and barrows, their monuments,

Stonehenge and the druid circles. He has a haunting sense of the primitive in character. He sees his figures against the background of their ancestry; their acts are one with those of family, race, or tribe. And in this the distinctive thing is, not that he sees in heredity one of the forces, perhaps the main force, of the fate in the hands of which his characters are helpless, but that to him tribal and racial origins are uniformly Norse or Germanic. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes; Sea-robbers sweeping the coasts of Sussex, Wessex, and Kent; foray, raid, and reprisal;—these are the forces that mould his men and women. There is an occasional Roman legion that comes and goes with no other effect than to give a name to the place of its encampment. In the formation of character, Hardy recognizes no force that was not at work before the coming of the Normans.

Norse or Germanic, our ancestors had an outlook on life that was neither clear nor bright. They were not thinkers; they did not often pause to look ahead, but when they did they saw a gloom and obscurity they could not penetrate. Beauty must perish; Balder must die; Loki prevails that he shall not return. However much or little they believed in life after death they could not see beyond the grave. The abodes of the dead are earthy, damp, cold, and sunless as the grave itself; the road to them, whether it be mortal or immortal who travels it, leads ever downward and northward. Hardly better off than mankind are the gods themselves, who over their own fate or that of men have little power. They are primitive ideals, glorified men, heroes writ large, magnificent in physical strength, their craft increased by magic and freedom from natural law; but there is in them nothing of the spirit, and their power is not from it. In the last cataclysm they go down before huge insensate powers, the Fenris Wolf, and the Midgard Serpent. They know they are to die, and they go gloriously to their end at the hands of a senseless inexorability. There are hints of a sunrise to follow the twilight of the gods, but they are vaguer even than the nature of the end. It is the mythology of a race of fighters whose minds do not reach beyond their own experience. Their imagination is as a mirror, or as a series of mirrors which reflect back and forth one into another successively fainter images of the same thing. Without going

into the nature and origin of myth one may be permitted to see here the cycle of good and evil, summer and winter, getting vaguer as it gets more remote from life, lingering always on the winter, the cheerless cold, the longest part of the year. And whatever we may believe about the origin of it all, we must feel that there is something here of the influence of nature on mood and thought. We see man in the grip of the iron frost, which relaxes only long enough to give him an elusive ray of hope. Inexorable as the cold may be, hope flickers bravely through to the end. Even in the last and longest winter of all, the man thinks that if only he could survive long enough there might be springtime beyond.

All this is, of course, the Norse mythology, but it represents accurately enough the outlook on life of our Germanic ancestors. The *Beowulf* is their epic, the one piece of literature we have which they brought with them from the continent. In it the only religious principle that is expressed is "Gath a wyrd swa bio scel"—Goeth ever fate as it will. It means that in the ultimate power the man sees no thinking being like himself. In the dawning of religious thought he creates gods in his own image, exalted men. He makes them thinking and sentient,—powers for good so far as their powers go. But as he thinks further he sees good constantly overcome by evil; there must be a blind power stronger than the gods. They, though their power is less, are not blind. It is as if Ulysses were shut forever into the cave with the blinded and maddened Polyphemus—and that, one must think, would have been the situation if the Northern peoples had told the story; it is the cheerful Southern races who allow the sailors to escape. From the forces outside yourself, then, you have nothing to hope. Within there is something more, but only so much of comfort as lies in your sense of superiority to the Polyphemus fate. This sense is based on the rationality and justice of your actions. You cannot respect fate. If you can respect yourself, you are superior. Cling to your self-respect, then, for it is all you have. And this our forefathers did in something the spirit of the Earl's daughter in Stevenson's fable: "I have no heart for it," she said, "but it is all God offers."

Although this is the mood of a race of fighters, it is not the simple faith of men of action who might be expected to have an

instinctive trust in the "livableness of life" and "the ultimate decency of things." They have begun to think, see no logic in the universe, and have not reasoned round to faith again; started with Thor, Odin, and Balder, saw the fate beyond them, and have not got beyond that. It is in a similar way that the idea seems to take shape in Hardy's mind. It is the same idea of fate, growing larger and more grim as he goes on, and constantly shadowed forth in his mind in terms of the nature against which he sees man struggling. This is the background against which we can see the figure of Thomas Hardy most distinctly. In it we can trace the pattern of his mood, and, seemingly, its origin, and in it we can see the elements of his greatness. It is in this sense that Hardy's message seems to come to us from the fathers of our race. That it is epic in its subject-matter can be shown even more clearly.

"Fate goeth ever as it will." As in the *Beowulf* so in Hardy we look in vain for any other fixed theory. In the poem entitled "Subalterns" we see the forces of nature moving as impotently as man. The God to whom they are subordinate, however, is the impersonation of the senseless inexorability of the Northern religion. In the poem "God Forgotten" we have our only glimpse of him as a rational being,—rational, but far from infallible, for he has forgotten the existence of this suffering planet. More characteristic is "New Year's Eve" in which God has neither thought nor feeling, but merely power. "My labors logicless," he says, "you may explain, not I." "Sense-sealed I have wrought," he continues, and when he opens the new year he weaves it "by rote as heretofore," and continues "in his unweaving way," as unbending as the Moving Finger of the oriental fate. It is the very Setebos of Caliban—a power that accords to man precisely the treatment that Caliban might accord to the crabs that are at his mercy, such treatment, for example, as is given to the Dame of Athelhall (*Poems of the Past and Present*) or to Phillis Grove in "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" (*Life's Little Ironies*). In the poem entitled "The King's Experiment" this irony is pointed out directly as humor on the part of King Doom.

If this be Hardy's view of the problems—and it needs no

piling up of citations from the whole series of his novels to show that it is—his friends might well be called upon to show cause why he should be read. Ask them and they tell of his “optimism,” heroic optimism, in unflinching recognition of the facts and the belief that the world is good in spite of all the bad there is in it. It is the creed of the man who

“Never dreamed though right were worsted wrong
would triumph;
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
sleep to wake.”

That Hardy faces the darker facts without flinching no one has ever thought of denying—his friendly critics demonstrate it again and again, perhaps because it is so much easier to prove than that he sees the ultimate good beyond. Of this last, one of the more specific expressions is worth quoting:—

“Egdon Heath in the *Return of the Native* stands as Hardy’s supreme personification of the infinite in terms of natural phenomena. . . . Vast, dark, imperturbable, eternal, it crushes out alike indifferently the lives of heroes and dastards, and punishes with despotic irony all their efforts to escape their doom. . . . Nevertheless, this is but one side of the shield. True, nature in her beauty is often indifferent to the special needs of man, and in her sublimity she is often terrible, but we must never forget that she is actually beautiful and actually sublime. . . . He repines at her destructiveness but at the same moment he thrills us with the sense of her power and majesty and eternal dignity. For him the life-giving and life destroying earth is also life-beautifying.” *

If this be optimism it is heroic indeed. We are told that if we are to be crushed by nature representing fate, it is sufficient compensation to us that she is beautiful. We are to come gladly to our race against this Atalanta, content that the headsman’s sword awaits us at the end of it,—and it is no less the headsman’s sword for being wreathed in flowers,—sufficiently rewarded by the revelations of beauty that are ours during the struggle. That nature is life-destroying is balanced by the fact that she is life-giving, and life is hers to take. To most of those who utter it

* E. S. Bates, *International Journal of Ethics*, 1905.

this is the cry of Job,—a cry of resignation rather than of optimism.

At the time he embodied his conception of the infinite in Egdon Heath Hardy's idea may have been not unlike that set forth in the paragraph quoted above. Later, however, blindness and power are more in his mind than sublimity and beauty, and to-day one almost inevitably interprets the Egdon Heath idea in the light of the later passages. In *The Dynasts* the Spirit of the Pities implores the Immanent Will to spare the human victims of the tragedy, whereupon the Spirit of the Years says:—

“Then note anew
(Since ye forget) the ordered potencies,
Nerves, sinews, trajects, eddies, ducts of It
The Eternal Urger, pressing change on change.

. . . . a preturnatural clearness possesses the atmosphere of the battle-field, in which the scene becomes anatomized and the living masses of humanity transparent. The controlling Immanent Will appears therein, as a brainlike network of currents and ejections, twitching, interpenetrating, entangling, and thrusting hither and thither the human forms.”

Whereupon the Ironie Spirits comment as follows:—

“Stand ye apostrophizing That
Which, working all, works but thereat
Like some subline fermenting-vat

“Heaving throughout its vast content
With strenuously transmutive bent
Though of its aim unsentient?”

Here Fate, Nature, the Immanent Will, the World Soul,—whatever we call the power to which Hardy accords the capital letter but denies the personal pronoun,—offers us no sublimity save that of a fermenting-vat by way of compensation for the suffering. If, however, we can let Egdon Heath stand by itself, we should certainly be right in seeing in it both sublimity and beauty, and whether Hardy means it or not, these qualities do compensate the victims of fate for what they helplessly undergo. The fact is we do offer ourselves for the race, and end it not in fear of the sword, but in reluctance to leave the sight of the beauty that has been before us throughout the course. This is surely opti-

mism; if Hardy expresses it, it is his; if his friends find it in his transcript of life as they find it in life itself, it is theirs.

It is safe to say that there is no story in the lore of the North which shows us compensation in the beauty of the world for the darker side of life. It was not with those who shaped the myths a principle sufficiently fixed and widespread to find anything more than indirect expression. The mood of Egdon Heath they note now and then in frost-bound land or cloud-hung desert of waters when its mood is theirs, and a certain sublimity they show in it, too, but never the glad beauty that compensates for sorrow. This compensation they find almost solely in the struggle itself, and that for its own sake, not for its effect on human character. What Hardy thinks on this point we may determine from such characters as Michael Henchard. His nature has a force which brings upon the man troubles unknown to Farfrae, whose life runs smoothly because he is "just like everybody else." Henchard is superior to the fate which pursues him; so is Tess Durbeyfield; and whether or not they gain strength from the struggle, they have in Hardy's thought the comfort that comes from a mind conscious of its own integrity. From George Eliot's novels we get a similar impression; they leave with us a sense of the impotence of man as opposed to the forces of heredity and tradition, and the best she sees in the struggle is the beauty of character that may come out of it. Yet, dark as her view of the matter is, there is more of light in it than there is in Hardy's. George Eliot takes it for granted that the beauty and strength of character are worth while. We are not sure what value Hardy attaches to them; little or none in this world surely, if we are to judge by the fates he allots to Michael Henchard and to Tess.

With the facts before us it is hard to see how the term optimist applies to Hardy—we are apt to call our Germanic forbears pessimists, and surely Hardy without reproach may stand beside them. But even if we compare Hardy's view with the most obvious expression of faith in the ultimate good, "Be good and you will be happy," the contrast is not so complete as at first sight it might appear. If the utterer of these words thinks at all, he does not mean that worldly prosperity will follow rectitude of conduct as a consequence—Eliphaz and Bildad struggled in vain

to uphold that view. If he means that with the peace that attends an untroubled conscience you may be happy, be the circumstances what they may, he goes no farther than Hardy himself. In actual knowledge optimist and pessimist stand on the same plane; it is faith that makes the difference between them. Hardy is just as much the optimist as a man can be without faith, and to most of us that means that he is a pessimist. And even in fatalism there are degrees. To most minds there is a wide separation between the passive oriental "Drink, for ye know not whence ye come nor why!" and the Northern idea of "one last fight and the best," be the end what it may. Hardy may not have quite so much faith in the gospel of salvation by fighting as do Beowulf and Wiglaf, but between him and the roses and red wine there is an unbridgeable gulf.

"Life's impulsion by Incognizance"—this phrase from *The Dynasts* shows us Hardy's idea of God and the ways of God to man. If this were all, it were what many a fool hath said in his heart, or from the housetops, with never a suggestion of either myth or epic. In Hardy's work as a whole there is an epic quality which lies in what has been cited as the personification of the infinite in nature and in man, even as the older singers expressed it in finite terms of hero or of god. Just as the Northern gods turn our minds constantly towards a symbolic view of the processes of nature, so Hardy keeps before us always a partial or complete identification of nature with the fate which oppresses mankind. Of this the best example is the one already so often mentioned, the description of Egdon Heath. In *Two on a Tower* it appears in Hardy's expressed wish—amply fulfilled—"to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe." This universe plays precisely the same part in the novel that Egdon Heath plays in *The Return of the Native*, and might be described in identical terms: "a personification of the infinite in terms of natural phenomena"; "vast, dark, imperturbable, eternal." In *The Woodlanders* is the same conception of nature; we are never away from it; not only does it brood over the whole action of the tale, but the characters are almost bodily identified with the functions they perform as if they were the half-gods of the myths, eternal

as the seed-time and the harvest. Marty South, when she and Winterbourne are planting the young pines, is at one with the trees as if she were a very dryad. Winterbourne shows like a god of the cider harvest when Hardy describes him as "Autumn's very brother," and we remember his glowing sister, drawn by Keats, as she sits beside the cider-press. Marty South again Hardy immortalizes in the fidelity of her love as she stands alone at last at the grave of Winterbourne, "and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for a loftier quality of abstract humanism."

It is true of course that all literature in shadowing forth the meaning of life shows us the permanent and abstract in human terms, and every artist, almost from the very fact, is a myth-maker. The point is merely that Hardy's myths are not those of the Ægean or the Adriatic, but of the North Sea and the Baltic. His god of the harvest does not tread the grape, but presses the apple; his background is the sinister gloom of the heath or the vacant horror of the stellar spaces. And as the myth stories accumulate into the epic, so in Hardy the constant presence of the idea of fate in terms of the nature against which man struggles grows greater, more oppressive, more grim, as his work goes on. It would be possible to trace this growth through his novels; it is not an even movement, it ebbs and flows somewhat, but it reaches at various periods certain fairly definite stages which are marked by one and another of the novels until it reaches *The Dynasts*, in which the epic quality must be reckoned with. It is a dramatization of the epic that challenges both Shelley and Byron. Shelley's attempt soars higher than Hardy's, and Byron's is more dramatic, but neither is so concrete. Byron, like Hardy, is expressing the unweeting way of the Immanent, Will; he is epic, for the ways of God to man are epic matters always. But in *Cain* the man is Byron; so also is Lucifer. Byron is satanic in his vain dashings against the citadel of Heaven. Hardy contemptuously lets the citadel alone and gives his attention to his fellow-victims. In this his spirit is not like Shelley's, one of pity and sympathy; his attempt is not to ameliorate and uplift; his vision is not that of the ideal world. It is like the best of Byron in its recognition of the unquenchable

soul. It is desperate but not despairing. It is not Childe Harold, but Childe Roland. His way lies through doubt, horror, and despair to the cul-de-sac where lies the end, and there, dauntless as Childe Roland, he sounds his horn.

To stand upon the defensive in speaking of Hardy's gloomy outlook upon life, to try to turn his pessimism into something else, is to lose sight of the fact that these are the most important elements of his greatness. We do not agree with Hardy, but we love to read him. We have outgrown Thor, Odin, and the Twilight of the Gods. Intellectually we have left Beowulf, Grendel, and the Hall of Heorot far behind us. Emotionally we turn back to them again and again, for they are the epic of our race. Saxon, Dane, and Norse are the foundation-stones of our racial character; their common heritage was so well established by the eleventh century that the Norman in us is a mere ornament on a well-advanced structure. The German and Scandinavian elements stand five or six to one against the Latin. This unchanged and unchanging heritage of ours Hardy expresses, and it is his first assurance of permanence. The second is the epic quality of the expression, a quality which we feel in the novels scarcely less than in *The Dynasts*. We see beyond the struggle of Eustacia Vye and Clym Yeobright against Egdon Heath, and read of man dependent on the moods of nature. No one reads *The Return of the Native* without feeling that Egdon Heath is just as much a character in it as if it were called Thor or Loki or Saturn and given a movable bodily shape. Hardy's work is the Anglo-Saxon epic of the nineteenth century just as surely as the *Beowulf* is the epic of the race before its centuries were numbered.

ROBERT PALFREY UTTER.

Amherst, Massachusetts.